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THE URBAN HABIT OF MIND¹

HOWARD B. WOOLSTON
College of the City of New York

Man begins his career as a child of Nature: he completes it as a creature of Art. When Aristotle said, "Man is by nature a political animal," he meant that essential human qualities are developed in civil society. Izoulet makes the same point in stating that the mind is the child of the city.² Modern psychologists agree that social environment is a basic factor in the development of personality. If this be so, then the complex life of our great cities must profoundly affect the mentality of their inhabitants and result in reactions different from those characteristic of a rural population. How such modification comes about, it is the purpose of this paper to consider.

Urban life is marked by its heightened stimulation. When many people are brought close together contacts are multiplied and reactions are greatly increased.³ Men are assailed at every sense by the presence of their neighbors. The sound of footsteps and hoof-beats, the rattle of wagons and rush of cars, the clang of bells and hoot of whistles, the stroke of hammers and whirl of machinery, cries of children and peddlers, strains of music, shouts and laughter swell into a dull roar as the city wakes to its day's work. One who watches the torrent of people pouring through the boulevards of Paris, or who struggles for a foothold in the rush at Brooklyn Bridge, becomes aware of innumerable prods at his attention. The crowd sets a pace. The individual must hurry with it or be pushed aside.

Such excitement deeply stirs the nervous system. Architects tell us that tall buildings are set vibrating by the jar of street

¹ Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society.

² *La cité moderne*, 149.

³ See W. H. Burnham, "The Group as a Stimulus to Mental Activity," *Science*, May 20, 1910.

traffic, and this continued oscillation ultimately affects the structure. If stone and steel are thus moved, we should expect that the delicate organism of human beings might soon show signs of urban stress and strain. Such is the case. The natural result of city life is increased nervousness. The restless current in which men are immersed produces individuals who are alert, active, quick to seek new satisfactions. The recreation of city dwellers is perhaps as true an index of their characteristic reactions as can be found. The most popular amusement of large towns today is furnished by saloons, dance halls, variety theaters, and moving picture shows. All these have a tendency to stimulate a jaded attention by a succession of brief, powerful shocks that arouse the tired organism to renewed activity. Coney Island, with its "chutes" and "bumps," "loops of death" and "circular swings," "ticklers," peep shows, bars, and assorted gastronomic marvels, is a favorite summer resort for thousands of young New Yorkers. There is "something doing every minute," and the hard-worked clerk returns from half a day of such hilarity, exhausted, but exultant over a score of new sensations experienced.

The tendency of this spasmodic activity is either to consume the bodily energy or to blunt the sensibilities. Both results are abundantly exemplified among city people. On the one hand appears the high-strung society woman, who repairs to a sanitarium to nurse hysteria after an unusually gay season; the man who steadies his nerve with a cocktail before business and smokes furiously at night over his accounts; the broken wretch who flings himself into the river or gibbers in the psychopathic ward. For these the pace has been too hot. Their nerves are burning out. On the other hand we find business men who could not tell what manner of person sat beside them on the car this morning or across the lunch table yesterday; reporters absorbed in writing amid the uproar of a newspaper office; brokers cool and collected in the riot of the stock exchange. Habit has shunted the disturbing stimuli out of the field of their attention, leaving it free for items of special interest. This process of nervous selection is of fundamental importance in establishing an urban habit of mind.

In cities men are obliged to live in close touch with each other,

not only physically but also intellectually. Constant mingling on the crowded streets, in shops and factories, in parks and theaters; frequent public gatherings, religious and political; repeated meetings at unions, clubs, and social functions, all tend to heighten mental stimulation. The different quarters of the community are joined by lines of rapid transit; and when the street car proves too slow, the telephone announces instant summons. Five times a day express trains rush to important towns half-way across the continent, while every twenty minutes "locals" bring their throngs from fifty miles around. Boats sail up the river morning and evening, and every day coastwise steamers or ocean liners arrive. The telegraph pours in its flood of news collected from all over the world, the papers quickly issue special editions to spread important items. Magazines announcing attractive articles of current interest cover the corner news-stands, while the presses of the great metropolitan publishing houses are steadily turning out their grist of books on every conceivable topic of human thought. It seems as though in such places we could discern the brain of society at work.

The result of enlarged communication is to multiply ideas and break down provincial habits of thought. The city dweller is in a position to witness many interesting, novel, and important occurrences. He is accustomed to seeing skyscrapers, subways, foreigners, dignitaries, and street-fights. A typical man of the town knows about a vast number of things, if only superficially. He may not feel or think as deeply as the countryman, but his mind is probably more alert than that of one who contemplates the slow cycle of the seasons. Often like Tomlinson, he has guessed, he has heard, he has read in a book of matters beyond his ken, but his thought is awake and he eagerly seeks the latest information. The daily news becomes a necessity, even for workingmen.¹ Suburban trains show the paper habit to be as inveterate as is gum chewing. It may be that both are symptoms of the same organic craving. Light magazines supply a secondary intellectual diet, while books are widely read. A hasty examination of the reports of public libraries in ten of our largest cities shows that from 5 to 20 per cent of the population avail themselves of the circulating privileges of

¹ Chapin, *Standard of Living of Workingmen's Families in New York*, 211-18.

these systems. Many other persons use the library for reference and occasional reading. An analysis of books drawn for home use shows that the greatest demand is for fiction, with history, applied science, and social questions next in order on the active list. We have no adequate returns for private and special collections. But so much is perhaps sufficient to prove that city folks possess the primary qualification for mental growth, namely, rational curiosity.

As in the case of nervous stimulation, this accelerated mental activity has both beneficial and harmful consequences. A broader view leads to wider toleration. The eye of the gossip is less constantly fixed upon individuals, and greater freedom is the result. Ancient loyalties begin to appear absurd to the children of immigrants surrounded by a life with different standards. The country boy who has attended church regularly at home, neglects to unite with any city congregation, or goes to service less frequently as he finds new interests. To the foreign student the gay metropolis offers alluring opportunities for dissipation. A subtle change is wrought in the point of view of a young matron who finds that women of the smart set may smoke, drink cocktails, and frankly enjoy the ballet. The typical clubman is cosmopolitan in his tastes, mildly cynical in his views of personal virtue, and somewhat bored by expressions of fresh enthusiasm. There is a tendency to become blasé, to shrug the shoulders at ancient abuses, and to seek for new diversion. All this apparently indicates a breaking down of old standards and a lowering of moral tone.

At the same time, the process of intellectual accretion and attrition leads to independence of thought and to the establishing of more comprehensive social values. The personal element becomes less important in urban relations. Allegiance to clan and racial traditions tends to fade away in general civic movements. Judgment becomes colder and more objective, manners more reserved, conduct less considerate. Men are rated according to fixed standards, such as wealth, party, occupation. They become types to be reckoned by numbers rather than according to individual peculiarities. The city home is identified as 45 West 86th Street, apartment number 24. Standardization, uniform items, statements of quantity are characteristic of the best municipal

reports. A budget exhibit with maps and charts becomes a necessity if citizens are to understand how a hundred metropolitan authorities dispense annually one hundred and ninety million dollars.¹

This reduction of social elements to scale and measure has been admirably set forth by Professor Simmel in his *Philosophie des Geldes*. The author remarks that politics and finance, rather than poetry and fishing are characteristic urban activities.² In these more strenuous occupations it is majorities and bank balances that count. On certain streets practically everything is priced and sold. Service and sermons, votes and virtue are quoted at market rates. The holiday season with its commercial Santa Claus, tips, and necessary remembrances makes the flat dweller wonder if good will among men does not come rather high. The same process of standardization is applied to the measurement of time. As appointments become more numerous they must be accurately fixed. A request to come again tomorrow means that the busy editor has no place for an interview on his crowded calendar. Street cars run under three-minute headway; time clocks register the instant employees enter the factory; quick-lunch counters cater to rapid transit between business and pleasure. The whole scale of social interplay is definitely arranged and finely notched. Now such quantitative expressions are indicative of what is sometimes termed the scientific attitude of mind, that is, an effort to measure forces objectively.

When men are thus graded upon an impersonal basis, an advanced type of competition and co-operation is made possible. Cities have from the beginning had a more mixed population than the surrounding country. Common defense, commercial and cultural opportunities attract enterprising individuals from the land and across the seas. Caste distinctions are less firmly established and democratic control is more general. Under the demands of a great labor market, the cheapest or the most efficient workers secure the jobs. Some years ago the newsboys down town in

¹ The recent Budget Exhibit of New York City.

² See his lecture on "Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben" in the *Gehe Stiftung*, Dresden, 1903.

Chicago were hard-hitting Irish lads. Gradually industrious Jewish boys, who were on their corner early, rain or shine, edged out their more erratic competitors. More recently the Italian, who is both a fighter and a stayer, pushed his way into the business.¹ The same process of displacement has taken place in the clothing trades and construction work. In the former, Hebrews have superseded Germans, in the latter, Italian laborers are pressing hard on the Irish. In many lines, wider competition leads to a more severe economic struggle. Greek bootblacks, French cooks, and German correspondence clerks now appear to survive in this process of urban selection. Under the intensified pressure, racial and national prejudice gives way to tests of capacity.

Upon this new foundation a rearrangement of social classes is effected. The man who is a specialist in any line is associated with others who share his particular interests. Slavic and Saxon workers unite in stockyard unions; girls from up-state and from other lands are brought together in stores and factories; men from old families and clever upstarts meet in business; foreign artists and native amateurs are drawn into musical clubs; Irish and Italian Catholics worship in the same churches. A different combination of factors co-operating for various purposes thus results. A less instinctive type of association, a more rational scheme of subordination is rendered possible. The man who seeks for personal distinction in any of these functional groups must conform to its standards of eminence. He must be able to work with his associates and to merit their confidence in his ability. And finally, he must serve the community well along such lines, adjusting his efforts to its demands or leading the public to adopt his more advanced point of view.

Acquiring this concept of a part in the life of a community marks the beginning of the real process of assimilation. The individual now thinks of himself as sharing in a larger social economy. If his adjustment is to be complete, he must find a place in all the essential associations of the locality. He must become a co-operating member in several of its great institutions. For this purpose

¹ Myron Adams, "Children in American Street Trades," *Annals of the American Academy*, XXV, 439 ff.

the many private associations and public agencies in cities offer abundant opportunity. While it is true that racial discrimination persists and new local or economic distinctions appear in the town, it is no less true that the mere number of meetings and assemblies makes the crossing of lines frequent. The very process of specialization itself makes the fact of interdependence plain. A strike of motormen or garbage collectors immediately affects many suburbanites and city housewives. A general discussion of the reason for such trouble cannot help giving some perception of common interest in private and public corporations. In this way the final stage of making a citizen is entered.

It may be said that this hasty survey of the development of a townsman's point of view merely repeats well-known steps in the general process of socialization. That is perfectly true. The only point in rehearsing the successive stages is to make plain that in cities the process goes on very much more rapidly than elsewhere, because social pressure is more intense. A few years or a single generation in town serves to sharpen the wits, to enlarge experience, and to secure adaptation of conduct more completely than is possible in quieter rural life. It is a tragic fact well known to social workers that many young men and women in our cities break with their country-bred parents because of impatience with what they consider antiquated and outlandish customs.

The words *civil*, *urbane*, and *politic* indicate that men soon realized how good manners and diplomacy were promoted by city life. In contrast, the terms *rustic*, *pagan*, and *heathen* connote a certain backwardness among country folk. The German word *kleinstädtisch* suggests that between the peasant and the cosmopolitan are many degrees of provincialism. On the other hand *grossstädtisch* distinctly conveys the idea of elegance and fashion. It may be granted that the proverbial "smartness" of the city chap is superficial, but the fact remains that ambitious country boys seek the stirring life of towns and are apparently stimulated by it.

It may be said, further, that the difference in reaction between townsmen and countrymen is merely a matter of fashion and habit. Certainly rapid change does not always signify substantial progress. Nor is shrewdness and enterprise by any means an

urban monopoly. Our essential mental furniture is much the same throughout the land. This is also largely true. Yet several small mental differences gradually establish a well-recognized psychological type. Tarde says that "The cities attract to themselves from all directions the most active brains and the most nervous organisms, the fittest to utilize modern inventions. This is the way in which they form the modern aristocracy, a select, non-hereditary, but liberally recruited body; and yet this does not keep it from being as scornful of the lower rural population as were the nobles of the old régime, of the common people."¹ The leading artists of France seek Paris, Englishmen with literary aspirations make for London, and American financiers gravitate toward Wall Street.

The city is a great agency for social selection. Ripley tells us that the urban type in Europe is characterized by long heads, dark complexions, energy and radical tendencies.² One is sometimes inclined to believe as he walks through the streets of New York, that a dark, city-broken race from the East is forcing the Anglo-Saxon stock toward the frontier. Professor Ross has shown how imitative conduct predominates in cities.³ If, now, in addition to type of reaction and apperceptive mass, we can discover certain definite lines of interest and activity that control the thought of townsmen and distinguish their life from that of countrymen, we shall have established our contention that there is an urban habit of mind.

Business has long claimed the town as its particular field of activity. Many oriental cities grew up about trading points where caravan and sea routes meet. Traveling merchants sought the protection of mediaeval fortresses and their guilds gradually gained control of important markets. The commercial character of the townsman is attested by the word *bourgeois*, which in origin is identical with the German *Bürger* and the English *burgess*. Most great modern cities have developed as centers of trade. The conversation of men of affairs bristles with references to London, Hamburg, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Capital has

¹ *Laws of Imitation* (Parsons), 226.

² *Races of Europe*, chap. xx.

³ *Social Psychology*, 58-61.

sought these busy markets, and financial control is centered in a few metropolitan exchanges whose quotations fix prices for the world.

The Industrial Revolution, which brought in the factory system, caused towns to spring up rapidly about sources of water power, coal, and iron. Indeed the modern city can be recognized afar by its smoke stacks, and even at night, by the glow of mills and furnaces. Into these great labor markets press thousands of ambitious young men and women, eager to make their fortunes. As clerks, artisans, and laborers they offer their services and swell the number of employees. Three-fourths of the population of German cities today are directly or indirectly dependent upon industrial occupations.¹ A special type of industry sometimes controls the lives of most of the people in such places. For example, in 1900 the making of cotton cloth in Fall River absorbed about 80 per cent of all those engaged in local manufactories.² So steel-working in Pittsburgh, meat-packing in Chicago, diamond-polishing in Amsterdam, the cutlery trade of Sheffield, the manufacture of collars and cuffs in Troy, and the industry that gives Gloversville its name has a prevailing influence in the local economy.

Not merely as seats of productive enterprises are cities significant, but also as great centers of consumption they demand attention. Their huge populations must be housed and clothed and fed. The assembling and distribution of such necessary supplies engages a host of builders, grocers, cooks, and tailors. As wealth increases and taste develops, finer goods and more expert services are demanded. Artists and specialists of all sorts are imported. Leisure must be enlivened, urban life must be beguiled to make its strenuous round of details tolerable. So the city sets the fashion in dinners, dress, and gay divertisement. What housewife can resist the attractions of a metropolitan department store? Our approved modes, amusements and polite vices are advertised to hail from Broadway, The Strand, and the Champs-Élysées.

In his *Arbeit und Rhythmus* Bücher has shown that a man's occupation affects his nerves and his thought. The broad economic

¹ See Waentig, "Wirtschaftliche Bedeutung der Grossstädte," in the *Gehe Stiftung*, 1903.

² Twelfth Census, VIII, 382.

interpretation of history has become a commonplace of social theory. Whatever validity this point of view possesses must be applicable in the distinction made between the type of mentality characteristic of city and country populations. The former are mostly engaged in industry, commerce, and specialized service; the latter are generally occupied with agricultural pursuits. Some ethnologists consider trade a distinct cultural stage in advance of agriculture. However that may be, when a man enters the town he leaves the fields behind him and plunges into a social economy that promotes mental activity different from that induced by nature.

In reading history one constantly recurs upon the names of Babylon, Thebes, Athens, Rome—cities that for centuries dominated the ancient world. To the Greeks and Romans, *city* and *state* were synonymous terms. In classic times, only persons who possessed the franchise of the capital were complete citizens. The fall of Carthage, of Jerusalem, of Constantinople, and Granada marks the passing of a people and the eclipse of their civilization. The defense of important towns is the main task of military strategy.¹ Their capture by an enemy means disorganization of the administration and paralysis of trade. The rise of Venice and Genoa, of Bremen and Lübeck marks a new epoch of civic art and patriotism in western Europe. Local liberties were established, and only gradually yielded to the authority of the crown. The development of modern national government is signalized by the growth of courts at Paris and London, by the centralization of authority in Vienna and Berlin, by the location of federal headquarters at Berne and Washington. The political significance of such places can scarcely be overestimated.

The rapid growth of city populations gives them an increasing proportion of representatives in state and national assemblies. As a result, the balance of power between parties tends more and more to be decided by the vote of urban majorities. The modern political leader is less likely, therefore, to be a Cincinnatus than a man who has an office in town and who frequents the clubs and

¹ See Schäfer, "Die politische und militärische Bedeutung der Grossstädte," *Gehe Stiftung*, 1903.

lobbies of the capital. The boss must be near the telephone and the newspaper offices. The ambitious candidate must mingle with "the boys" and be seen frequently at public gatherings. The constant influx of convertible immigrant voters must be looked after. Consequently cities become centers for party organization. Our more progressive towns are beginning to develop a distinctive type of political activity. The peculiar business functions of the local corporation force themselves upon the attention of thoughtful men, and many citizens hear and read of municipal home rule, commission government, and control or ownership of public utilities.

Moreover the character of the city electorate is significant for political action. The countryman is traditionally conservative, though often independent in his thinking. On the other hand, the townsman is more radical, though frequently unduly influenced by self-interest and demagoguery. Besides these general temperamental tendencies, the economic differences between landed interests and urban commercial enterprises leads to a certain opposition of policy, as seen, for example, in contests over import duties, currency, and taxation. Further, the growing distinction in industrial centers between capitalists and propertyless workingmen sets off the latter as perhaps the most revolutionary element in the state. As this class grows and becomes united in political action, cities are bound to become hotbeds of radicalism.

When a traveler inquires what places in a foreign country he should see in order to understand the spirit and achievement of its people, he is almost invariably urged to visit the national capital and the principal cities. Consequently most journeymen students follow the same trail of culture through English cathedral towns, along Parisian boulevards, into German musical centers and Italian cradles of art, with a brief pilgrimage to the ruins of ancient grandeur about the Mediterranean. Impressions of rural districts are gained for the most part from fleeting glimpses through car windows or from excursions to places famous for their natural beauty. Such tours may be inadequate for the interpretation of national life, and yet a brief stay in the metropolis yields more fruitful material for the study of social tendencies among people than does longer residence in secluded regions.

Great cities present an epitome of the civilization about them. Their historical museums, galleries of national art, and state libraries assemble the records of past development; their public buildings, monuments, parks, and streets reflect accepted standards of administrative ability. The schools and universities of leading towns are generally regarded as criteria for the country. Playgrounds and gymnasia, theaters and concerts supply amusement and recreation. Metropolitan churches enlarge their activities, philanthropic agencies furnish special opportunities for those in untoward circumstances, and reform agencies establish their bureaux in every large place. Finally, the brilliant social life of the capitals attracts the clever, wealthy, and ambitious from the provinces, and forms a shining model for fashionable folk elsewhere. So we may say that the city is the efflorescence of a nation's culture.

Life in such focal points cannot be without its effect upon the mind and character of men. They are moulded by the institutions about them. Adaptation is necessary for life and sanity. A familiar illustration of the lack of adjustment to urban conditions is furnished by the awkwardness and confusion of visitors from the country amid the rush and complexity of public places. On the other hand, the tenderfoot appears ridiculous and ill at ease on the ranch. The story of the urchin who tramped back from a vacation camp because at night he missed the cars and electric lights, illustrates the same point. Even the prospect of better wages will not induce many workers to leave the miscellaneous attractions of the city for dull industrial villages. The urban mind seems to crave the bustle and gaiety, the variety and swift movement of the town. Progress, rather than contentment, is its criterion.

Mr. Howe has shown that a civilized environment favorably affects the minds of all who live in it.¹ The spiritual environment of a community is no less effective. In fact, physical provisions for welfare are but symbols of a common purpose which is reflected in them. The cathedrals of Europe are not monuments to any architect or individual builder, but to the aspiration of a city that raised them by the united efforts of its workers. The achievements of our modern commercial towns are perhaps less striking; yet one

¹ See preceding paper.

who enters a great seaport is impressed by its docks and bridges, its towering buildings and flashing transit lines. Here is immense power concentrated upon tasks of collective import. Various agencies are adjusted to common ends. The will of the people begins to disclose itself.

The facetious remark that Boston is not a locality but a frame of mind is largely true. Certainly Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, and Paris signify more than a group of buildings and a number of people. Their historic traditions, political standards, and social aims have profoundly influenced their inhabitants. The civic patriotism of Venice and Ghent, the municipal art of Cologne and Florence, the intellectual achievements of Geneva and Leyden have united their citizens with invisible ties. Every townsman has a feeling of pride in stating that he is "a citizen of no mean city." He applauds his local representatives in contests afield, and when abroad, greets with enthusiasm a stranger who hails from his home town. This conscious sharing in a common life is the essence of what we call "the social mind."

In cities such a concept is most readily attained. Merely mingling with the crowd that passes along the thoroughfares gives a man a different idea of his personality. He feels both less and greater than when alone—less, in so far as his individual powers are overshadowed by the throng about him—greater, in that he derives a sense of strength from the presence and co-operation of his fellows. Such a person is measurably socialized. He has caught a glimpse of a larger self realized in the activities of those about him. He recognizes the city as more than a place, a corporation, or a political unit. To him it is a spiritual unity, a unity not yet complete, but growing, enlarging, and striving for the realization of an adjusted order in which all men may share.